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SUBJECT: TALABANI, AMBASSADOR DISCUSS PCNS, SYRIA, PUK
ELECTIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 3873

Classified By: Charge d, Affaires Daniel Speckhard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: In a meeting on October 14, President Talabani informed the Ambassador that the Policy Committee on National Security (PCNS) met that day to discuss pressing security and political issues, and had resolved to keep its session open until the key issues have been resolved. Although most of the participants had endorsed Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's "4-Point Plan" for Baghdad security, influential Sunni Vice President Tarik al-Hashimi had not yet signed on to the plan. Talabani promised the Ambassador that he would persuade al-Hashimi to endorse Maliki's plan by October 15, so that he can join the other Iraqi Government officials in presenting the plan to the Iraqi public. In related news, presidential advisor Fakhri Karim gave the Ambassador a readout on his recent visit to Damascus, and Syria's claims of support for the new Iraqi Government. Karim noted, however, that despite Syrian officials' claims to support Baghdad and its efforts on anti-terrorism, they were loath to distance themselves publicly from the "Iraqi resistance" and the Saddamists/Baathists operating in Iraq. Finally, Talabani informed the Ambassador that the recent PUK elections were going very well so far, with only the Provincial elections still to be held. He was particularly pleased that senior PUK faction leader Kosrat Rasul Ali appeared to hold a comfortable lead over another senior PUK leader - and Talabani challenger - Noshirwan Mustafa. END SUMMARY.

PCNS Session to Continue Until All Issues Resolved

12. (S) In a late night meeting on October 14 with President Jalal Talabani and his advisor Fakhri Karim, Talabani informed the Ambassador that the Policy Committee on National Security (PCNS) meeting that afternoon had focused mainly on security issues, although Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had insisted on also linking the security discussion to political issues. Maliki presented a proposal for implementing his "4-Point Plan," for which both Talabani and Shia Vice President Adil Abd al-Mahdi expressed their support. Talabani also noted that SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim had been very tense during the meeting. He demanded better cooperation among the different political groups on key issues; Talabani indicated that Hakim was still upset over the difficult negotiations on federalism in the Council of Representatives. In addition, Hakim also complained that other groups were trying to remove the Shia; he referred to a recently published paper calling for political parties to challenge the Shia Coalition's leadership. The other members

of the PCNS tried in vain to point out that the paper in question had been signed only by Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQIZ) members. Talabani noted that the Shia Coalition had been very downbeat in their assessment of the overall situation in Iraq. (NOTE: In a separate meeting later that same night, Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih and former Transitional National Assembly Speaker Hajim al-Hassani confirmed that Hakim had been on edge during the PCNS, and al-Hassani stated that he had heard the Shia Coalition admit for the first time that the current situation in Iraq is the worst it has been in the past three years. END NOTE.)

13. (S) Even more troubling, Talabani said, was Sunni Arab Vice-President Tarik al-Hashimi's continuing absence from the PCNS. In increasing frustration with what he perceives to be the marginalization of Sunni Arab parties in the government, al-Hashimi has been withdrawing from the political process and did not attend the October 14 PCNS meeting. In addition, Talabani reported, he is the only senior Iraqi Government official who has not yet signed on to the Prime Minister's 4-Point Plan. Abd al-Mahdi suggested postponing the announcement of Maliki's proposal, to give al-Hashimi a chance to accept the document and be present with the rest of the Iraqi leadership when they announced it to the people. Talabani promised the Ambassador that he would convince al-Hashimi to sign the agreement by October 15 (reftel). Given all the issues that remained unresolved during yesterday's PCNS meeting, Talabani reported that the group had decided to keep the session "open" until all the points were settled. (NOTE: Presidency Council Chief of Staff Kamran Karadaghi told PolOff on October 15 that keeping the session open did not necessarily mean there would be more meetings, but that the members would continue to consult each other daily on the unresolved items. END NOTE.)

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Overtures from the Syrians

14. (S) Presidential advisor Fakhri Karim then gave a readout of his recent visit to Syria, where he claimed to have confronted them about their lack of support for the fledgling Iraqi Government. Karim, who noted that he had spent over 30 years collectively in Syria, pressed Syrian officials like Walid Muallim to ask Syrian President Bashar al-Asad for his official position on the following questions:

-- Support for GOI: Muallim and other Syrian officials assured Karim that they supported the Government of Iraq, but noted that setting a timetable for MNF-I withdrawal from Iraq would help increase support in Damascus and in other Arab states for assisting Iraq.

-- Position on Terrorism: Muallim denied accusations that Syria was not doing enough to combat terrorism, claiming that Damascus' crackdown at the border had led to increased protests from AQIZ members. In the end, however, Muallim promised that the Syrian Government would issue a strongly worded statement against terrorism, but would refrain from mentioning anything about "the Iraqi resistance."

-- Position on Saddamists: Muallim stated that Syria could not afford to alienate domestic political opinion by making any statements against the Saddamists, because they were fellow Baath Party members. He claimed, however, that if relations between Syria and Iraq continued to normalize the Syrian population would begin to call for distancing themselves from the Saddamists.

Karim added that the Syrians suggested one way to improve relations between Syria and Iraq was to share information on suspected terrorists who had been detained in Syria: Muallim referred to a list of over 1300 prisoners affiliated with AQIZ, Lebanon, etc. In return, Iraq would exchange the

Syrians being held as foreign fighter detainees to Damascus in exchange for Iraqi prisoners in Syria.

PUK Elections a Success

15. (C) Finally, Talabani noted that the recent Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) elections had been a success, with "very free elections." The new PUK party members had all emphasized loyalty to the Secretary General (Talabani) and to the unity of the PUK, and Talabani believed they were well-prepared to be the new leaders of the party. More than 450,000 Kurds participated in the elections, he said, with all but the Provincial Committee elections yet to be held. In response to the Ambassador's query, Talabani admitted that there had been one violent incident, in Khifri, between members of the Zengana and Jafri tribes. Talabani openly gloated, however, that "his" candidate Kosrat Rasul Ali had dominated the elections over Talabani challenger Noshirwan Mustafa.
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